

US Policy on Regional Conflicts: Cambodia, Afghanistan



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Following is an address by Robert M. Kimmitt, Under Secretary for Political Affairs, before the Asia Society, Washington, DC, April 18, 1990.

When I first learned that the topic for this evening was Cambodia and Afghanistan, I thought the audience might be a joint meeting of the Asia Society and some similarly distinguished Middle Eastern policy group. Then I recalled, however, that both you and virtually every foreign ministry except ours classifies the subcontinent as being in the Asian region.

I will take advantage of that fact to start with a few words about Kashmir, a situation of growing concern, then proceed to my remarks on Afghanistan and Cambodia. We will then turn to your questions on these and any other topics you wish to explore.

I will not discuss Kashmir in detail, but I do wish to make a few points. Although we believe neither

the Indian nor the Pakistani government seeks a confrontation on this divisive issue, we believe there is a growing risk of miscalculation, which could lead events to spin dangerously out of control. Such a development would be in the interests of no one. We thus have called upon both governments, in the spirit of the Simla accord, to take immediate steps to reduce the level of tension—by lowering rhetoric and avoiding provocative troop deployments—and instead devote their energies to addressing this issue through dialogue and negotiations.

We recognize that the Kashmir dispute, several times a cause of conflict between India and Pakistan, will be difficult to resolve. One reason for optimism, however, is the desire among many members of the international community to work to lessen tensions. Consultations on regional disputes elsewhere have demonstrated our ability to work

with others to help avoid such conflicts. We hope and intend that Kashmir will be an instance where our cooperation might make a difference.

Now let me turn to the subjects of this evening's presentation—Afghanistan and Cambodia.

Threats to Asian Security

Too often in public discourse, complex policy issues are reduced to evocative 30-second sound bites. And I cannot think of matters that lend themselves less to such treatment than the difficult regional conflicts. A well-informed citizenry is crucial to the health of a democracy, and the activities of the Asia Society—especially in deepening public understanding of the region—are an important contribution toward that end.

The import of events in Afghanistan and Cambodia stretches well beyond their borders. Asia is a dynamic region of growing importance to the United States. As Secre-

tary Baker often remarks, we are a Pacific as well as an Atlantic nation. Regional conflicts such as those in Afghanistan and Cambodia, along with the heavily armed stand-off on the Korean Peninsula, pose the principal threats to stability and security in South Asia and the Asia/Pacific regions.

Beginning in the mid-1980s, regional conflicts became an increasingly important part of our dialogue with the Soviet Union. It was Brezhnev's expansionist policies toward the Third World during the 1970s that either precipitated or fueled conflicts in Africa and Central America, as well as in Afghanistan and Cambodia. With the emergence of Mr. Gorbachev, we and the Soviets began to focus on extricating ourselves from these conflicts and resolving them through negotiation.

Tragic Parallels

While we must be careful to appreciate the features unique to each particular situation, the many similarities between the tragic conflicts in Afghanistan and Cambodia are striking.

- Both countries have suffered foreign invasion and occupation. Afghanistan was, in the view of many, the Soviet Union's "Vietnam," while Cambodia, with Moscow's support, came to be known as "Vietnam's Vietnam."

- Both have endured human tragedies of enormous scale. More than a million Afghans have been killed, and one-third of the population was driven to exile as a result of the Soviet invasion. In Cambodia, perhaps one million perished as a result of Khmer Rouge barbarism in the 1970s, and more than 200,000 subsist as displaced persons along the Thai border.

- The Soviets withdrew their forces from Afghanistan, and the Vietnamese state they have removed all of their combat units from Cambo-

dia. But both continue to shore up client regimes in Kabul and Phnom Penh that were installed at gunpoint.

US policy toward both regional conflicts has been consistent through successive administrations, Democrat and Republican. Along with the majority of the international community, we strongly opposed the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and the Vietnamese invasion and occupation of Cambodia. Along with a majority of the world community, we condemned both aggressive acts at the United Nations and other international fora. We also joined with others in refusing to recognize or deal with the regimes installed in Kabul and Phnom Penh as a consequence of foreign intervention.

We should keep in mind that our resolve, along with that of our friends and allies, led to important strategic results. On February 15, 1989, the last Soviet troops left Afghanistan. And though it remains to be verified, last September, Hanoi announced it had removed its combat troops from Cambodia. Yet the suffering of the Afghan and Cambodian peoples continues, and in both conflicts, peace remains an elusive goal.

One promising development arising from the recent talks between Secretary Baker and Foreign Minister Shevardnadze is our common view that elections can play an important role in establishing legitimate, credible governments in these two countries, as they have in other regional troublespots like Nicaragua and Namibia. We are emphasizing the importance of using the electoral process in both Cambodia and Afghanistan as an organizing concept to help achieve political solutions. The manner in which this concept is implemented in each case will differ. For example, the role played by the United Nations or other international organizations in helping organize or monitor the elections will naturally be adapted to local circumstances. But in both countries, it will be

important to establish a neutral political environment throughout the electoral process that would give the population confidence in the results and vest the winners with the necessary legitimacy to maintain peace and govern.

Policy Objectives in Afghanistan

Having pointed to some of their similarities, let me discuss the particulars of our approach toward each country. Our policy toward Afghanistan has three key objectives:

- The establishment of a representative Afghan government through a process of self-determination;
- The return of the refugees to a secure environment with dignity and honor; and
- An independent and non-aligned Afghanistan at peace with its neighbors.

Toward those ends, we have supported the Afghan resistance. Afghan courage and sacrifice, bolstered by support from the United States, Pakistan, and others, helped produce the withdrawal of Soviet combat troops after an invasion and more than nine years of occupation—a signal event with wide-reaching implications.

Despite the withdrawal of the Soviets, conflict continues. Afghans continue to die and be maimed. Millions remain displaced, separated from their homes and families. The economic and social fabric of one of the world's poorest nations continues to be rent by war.

We want the death and destruction to stop. We want the Afghans to be able to set aside their weapons and begin the enormous task of rebuilding their shattered nation. But we also recognize that only a political settlement will bring peace to Afghanistan.

The key to that peace is the establishment in Kabul of a representative government formed by the Afghans

Afghan people.

There is no such government now, and Soviet insistence on propping up the Najibullah regime is the single most important impediment to peaceful settlement. The simple truth is that a stable political settlement is not achievable so long as the Najibullah regime remains in power. This is not a US demand; it is a statement of Afghan reality.

Najibullah's regime is a direct consequence of the Soviet invasion. As such, and given his personal identification with, and responsibility for, some of the most horrendous human rights abuses, the vast majority of the Afghan people have rejected him and his close associates. Simply put, the resistance will not deal with him.

We believe it is in everyone's interests that Najib and his associates step aside so that a process of self-determination—elections or the more traditional *loya jirga*—can proceed under some form of neutral administration. We do not object to Najib or his associates participating in the elections. That is for the Afghans, not us, to decide.

We believe that an important step toward the end of the Afghan crisis would be the initiation of a dialogue between those active in the resistance and those Afghans now residing under regime control. This dialogue would be directed toward working out the details of a transfer of power and the act of eventual self-determination. However, we also believe that Afghans of the resistance will not participate in any dialogue that includes Najib. Again, this is not an American demand but a reflection of Afghan reality. A political dialogue is unlikely to go forward if Najib insists in being at the table. An act of self-determination cannot be held while he maintains the reins of real power.

continued conflict on the Soviet Union's southern border. We and the Soviets share the principal objective of attaining a peaceful and stable Afghanistan; one that will not be a source of instability in the region.

The Soviets have agreed with us that a transition process is necessary to achieve a political settlement. But we are still seeking Soviet agreement on the nature of a process that will be supported by Afghans whereby they can determine their own future.

We continue to have differences with the Soviets. But we do not think that our interests and those of the Soviets are irreconcilable. The Soviets have described their invasion of Afghanistan as a mistake; an act against the laws of the Soviet Union. Yet the Soviets, since their withdrawal, have furnished many billions of dollars in aid—military and non-military—to keep the Najib regime in power. This is money that can be better spent elsewhere. The new Soviet thinking we have seen in Europe has not yet been applied to Afghanistan. We hope that it will soon, not only for the good of the Afghan people but also for the long-term interest of the Soviet Union.

Aid for Refugees

In addition to pursuing a political settlement, the United States has been active in attempting to alleviate the suffering of the Afghan people, especially the millions of refugees. The United States plans to provide up to \$40 million to help refugees in Pakistan in this fiscal year through the United Nations and other international and non-governmental agencies.

We have also developed programs to assist the war-affected inside Afghanistan. We are providing approximately \$70 million in this fiscal year in cross-border humanitarian aid.

rehabilitation of Afghanistan's agricultural infrastructure. We expect to continue our cross-border food aid program, which amounted to \$33 million last fiscal year. We plan to contribute up to \$13.5 million this fiscal year to the humanitarian programs of the United Nations and other international organizations working inside Afghanistan, bringing to over \$40 million our contribution to the United Nations' Afghan emergency trust fund.

The refugees do not yet feel that they can return to their homes because of the continued risk of warfare, the dangers posed from millions of mines strewn over the land, and the lack of even a minimal support infrastructure. We are working with Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, the UN's coordinator for Afghanistan, to remove these barriers in areas free of combat since the Soviet withdrawal. However, guarantees are needed that these "zones of tranquility" will remain free of fighting and not be used to support military forces. If such guarantees are obtained, some refugees will opt to return home.

For more than a decade, while Soviet forces occupied the country, our Afghan policy enjoyed strong support from the Congress and the American public. The dimensions of the problem, the potential threat to our vital interests in Southwest Asia, were clear. Now that the Soviets have gone, the problem appears more complex. The lines to some may appear less clearly drawn. But the issue is straightforward: The consequences of the Soviet invasion—the regime it left behind in Kabul—is unacceptable to the Afghan people. Having achieved our initial objective, the removal of Soviet forces, we now seek to support the Afghan people in

their quest for self-determination. It is an honorable goal and one with which we think most Americans identify.

Cambodia: Hard Road to Peace

The conflict in Cambodia is at least as complex as that in Afghanistan. It has involved three overlapping antagonisms: Sino-Soviet, Sino-Vietnamese, and Vietnamese-Khmer. As Moscow and Beijing have normalized their relations, Sino-Soviet differences over Cambodia continue, but the differences are not as sharp as they once were. But the centuries old Sino-Vietnamese antagonism and the deeply rooted historic enmity between Khmer and Vietnamese remains.

US national interests in Cambodia are limited, as is our ability to influence events. But we do have an important stake in resolving the conflict in Indochina. Our primary geopolitical concern is the security of Thailand and the stability of ASEAN, the Association of South East Asian Nations, with which we have consulted closely on the Cambodia issue.

In our view, a just and durable settlement in Cambodia would enhance overall political stability and economic prosperity for all of Southeast Asia—an area of growing importance for US interests. A Cambodian settlement would also pave the way for the eventual integration of the Indochinese states—Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia—into this economically dynamic region and reduce Vietnam's dependence on the Soviet Union and Cambodia's dependence on Vietnam as well. It would also open the door to normalization of US-Vietnamese relations.

We have told Hanoi that we would envision normalization of relations with Vietnam in the context of an acceptable political settlement of the Cambodia conflict. The Vietnamese understand as well that, as a practical

reality, the pace and scope of the process will be affected by their continued cooperation with us on POW/MIA and other humanitarian issues.

I want to emphasize that we have no philosophical objection to normalization of relations with Vietnam. Speaking personally, as one who is now involved in the policy process and who once served and was wounded in Vietnam, I can assure you that we do not dwell on the past. Instead, we formulate our policy toward Vietnam in light of our national interests now and in the future. We believe that our interests and those of our allies and friends in Southeast Asia are best served by a comprehensive settlement in Cambodia. For that reason, we encourage Vietnam to contribute toward this objective.

There is a moral imperative as well. After three years of brutal, genocidal rule by the Khmer Rouge, a decade of occupation by Vietnam, and six months of continuing warfare among contending Cambodian factions, the long-suffering Cambodia people deserve peace. Cambodia is a challenge not just to the United States, but to the conscience of the entire international community.

US Policy Objectives

With all these considerations in mind, US administrations over the past 12 years—Democrat and Republican—have been committed to three central objectives:

- A verified withdrawal of Vietnamese troops;
- Prevention of a return to power by the Khmer Rouge; and
- Self-determination for the Cambodian people.

We feel a special urgency to end the bloodshed in Cambodia, move the conflict off the battlefield, and create a political process leading to free and fair elections; providing that troubled country with its first legitimate government in almost two decades. As Vietnam began to withdraw its troops last year, diplomatic efforts to bring about a resolution of the conflict accelerated. The United States agreed to participate in a Paris conference on Cambodia last August; Secretary Baker led our delegation. It was our hope that the meeting would achieve the sort of comprehensive settlement we are convinced is necessary. Unfortunately, the Paris conference did not achieve any dramatic break-throughs. But it did make substantial progress on most of the international aspects of a settlement and generated a positive momentum to the quest for peace.

The conference foundered, however, on the central issue: power-sharing among the Cambodian factions—the composition of an interim arrangement to govern Cambodia until UN-supervised elections can be held.

We believe that in the absence of a viable political process, the Cambodian factions would turn to military means to resolve the conflict. And indeed, the fighting did escalate in the aftermath of the Paris conference. We fear that the longer the fighting goes on, the more the situation may favor the dreaded Khmer Rouge.

In recent months, the United States has sought to move the conflict back to the negotiating table. After the Paris conference, Secretary Baker suggested that the five permanent members of the UN Security Council—the United States, USSR, China, France, and the United Kingdom—meet to try to craft an equitable framework for a settlement which could be recommended to the Cambodian groups. We also encouraged the continuation of regional ef-

forts in parallel with the "permanent five" process.

Since the beginning of the year, the "permanent five" have met three times in an effort to work out principles for a UN peacekeeping and administrative operation designed to shepherd the country through a transition period to free and fair elections. The idea of assigning the United Nations a major role in overseeing the peace process was floated by Congressman Steve Solarz and proposed by Australian Foreign Minister Evans late last year. It was an idea whose time had come, and the "permanent five" embraced it as well.

Tremendous effort will be required to build the necessary detailed framework for a settlement and to convince the Cambodian parties to accept it. But the five are well-positioned to make the attempt, given their connections with the respective Cambodian factions—the Chinese with the Khmer Rouge, the Soviets with Hanoi and the regime in Phnom Penh, and France, the United Kingdom, and ourselves with the non-communist resistance led by Prince Norodom Sihanouk.

We believe that an enhanced role for the United Nations in Cambodia may offer the last best chance for a durable, just settlement. A neutral, caretaker administration overseen by the United Nations could provide the way around the difficult question of how the Cambodian parties would share power fairly during the interim period. The United Nations, not the factions, would in effect administer Cambodia during that period. Thus, the obstacle posed by the concept of power-sharing would be minimized. The United Nations would assume responsibility for ensuring that no party would be advantaged or disadvantaged in the run-up to elections, and this would level the playing field.

Such an agreement is possible and could work. Its major features would include an early cease-fire and cutoff of all arms from outside Cambodia. A

UN peacekeeping force would monitor the cease-fire and supervise the regrouping and disarmament of the various forces. A UN administrative team, many of whom would be Cambodians drawn from both inside and outside Cambodia, would fill key positions in Phnom Penh and the provinces to ensure a secure, neutral political environment. This would allow preparations for an election to go forward. The United Nations would begin repatriating the many displaced Cambodians who have languished in camps along the Thai border. Both they and combatants from all factions would have the opportunity for a decent livelihood in a new Cambodia.

US Opposes Khmer Rouge

As we pursue this formula for an enhanced UN role, I want to be clear on one crucial point about US policy: the Bush administration is unalterably opposed to a return to power of the murderous Khmer Rouge. Our efforts to reach a comprehensive settlement are aimed at fashioning a structure of peace that contains effective measures to prevent the Khmer Rouge from returning to dominance. And under no circumstances can those Khmer Rouge leaders responsible for the policies of the past have any role in Cambodia's political future.

Certainly, implementation of this complex undertaking would be imperfect. Violations are to be expected. The Khmer Rouge threat would not disappear. But with China's active cooperation—which we believe would be forthcoming—there could be a relatively peaceful transition period culminating in free and fair elections. The Khmer Rouge, like the other Cambodian factions, would be constrained by the UN presence during the transition period. We anticipate that the Khmer Rouge would

emerge from this transition process politically weakened, less formidable militarily with their outside arms supplies halted, and isolated diplomatically. The newly elected government in Phnom Penh would be universally recognized and could count on widespread support in what could well be a long and difficult effort to root out hard-core Khmer Rouge guerrillas and rebuild the country.

The critics of our policy contend that a comprehensive solution is probably unachievable and, even if achieved, would be unworkable. Therefore, they argue that we should stop pursuing it and, instead, shift our support to the Hun Sen regime in Phnom Penh as the only bulwark against a return to power by the Khmer Rouge. In light of events in Eastern Europe and Nicaragua, they contend that fair elections can be held under the current regime in Phnom Penh.

Even if we were inclined to support a regime installed by Vietnamese invasion and led by former Khmer Rouge commanders, the real question is whether such support would contribute more effectively to a political settlement. And I do not believe it would.

The first requirement for a political settlement leading to elections is an end to the fighting. And without an agreement to which the Khmer Rouge and their sponsor, China, are parties, the fighting would go on. Our moving closer to Phnom Penh—and by implication Vietnam—would, in my view, serve only to strengthen the link between China and the Khmer Rouge. Severing, or at least weakening, that link is one real key to a solution.

In our view, a comprehensive political settlement offers the best assurance against the Khmer Rouge threat. None of the Cambodian parties can be justified in rejecting a fair test of Cambodian public opinion. If Hun Sen is as popular as he claims,

he has little to fear and much to gain from free and fair elections. The United States is prepared to accept the results of any elections judged to be free and fair.

For our part, the United States has supported Prince Sihanouk and the non-communists. We do so not because we expect the non-communists to win a military victory but because they are essential to a negotiated outcome and to providing the Cambodian people a choice other than that between two communist factions. Prince Sihanouk is a unique symbol, the individual who most embodies Cambodian nationalism and sovereignty. He is an important catalyst to the negotiating process, and the non-communist resistance is indispensable to his ability to play that role.

Finally, let me add that we all share the vision of turning Indochina from a battlefield into a marketplace. But there are no shortcuts or magic elixirs, only patient diplomacy and international cooperation. Before we reach that goal and embark on a new era in Southeast Asia, Cambodia must be freed from its long, dark nightmare.

Opportunities for Self-Determination

To conclude, let me say that while the Afghanistan and Cambodian tragedies share some common features, each situation has its own dynamic. We believe that the approaches we are pursuing to resolve these conflicts offer the best assurance of attaining just and durable solutions consistent with American values and interests.

In both instances, our efforts are focused on creating opportunities for the Afghan and Cambodian people to exercise self-determination. We and other powers can create frameworks, catalyze peace processes, and guarantee outcomes. At the end of the day, however, it is the Afghan and Cambodian parties and people who must decide their future, as are the people of Nicaragua, Namibia, and Eastern Europe. That is the ultimate objective of our policies. ■

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